

RECYCLING NOT SUCH A NEW IDEA

Saving Resources is an American Tradition

To some of us baby boomers, who lived through the 50s and 60s, recycling may seem like a new concept. After all, curbside recycling only came on the scene here in the Massachusetts in the mid-80's. But those whose memories stretch farther back will remember World War II, when saving materials for recycling was a patriotic act! Back in the early to mid-40s, Americans saved everything from aluminum foil to rubber tires--all in the name of the war effort.

Metals collected by every day folk were sent to smelting plants and then to the shipyards to build the fleets that would ultimately win the War against the Axis. It was a way the average American could feel she was doing her small part to help bring the boys home and end the conflict abroad.

According to the National World War II Museum in New Orleans:

“To meet America's metal needs, scrap was salvaged from basements, backyards, and attics. Old cars, bed frames, radiators, pots, and pipes were just some of the items gathered at metal ‘scrap drives’ around the nation. Americans also collected rubber, tin, nylon, and paper at salvage drives.”

During one five-month-long paper drive in Chicago, school children collected 36 million pounds of old paper, or about 65 pounds per child. Some say recycling paper didn't really help the war effort and that these sorts of material drives were really just a morale-boosting campaign. There can be no doubt, however, that scrap steel drives were key in winning the War. According to Cecil Adams, writer for the Chicago Reader, one nationwide campaign during the War netted five million tons of steel in just three weeks!

Rubber was in extremely short supply during the Second World War—especially after Japan invaded Southeast Asia, one of the U.S.'s chief sources of the raw material. To address the shortage, the federal War Production Board (WPB) launched a “Keep America Rolling” campaign encouraging citizens to turn in old tires for recycling. The government also asked Americans to save rubber by inflating their tires properly. Campaign posters bore slogans like “Save Rubber—Check Your Tires Now!”

World War II era campaign slogans illustrate the “3Rs” well even today:

Reduce—“Do With Less, So They'll Have More” and “Food is a Weapon. Don't Waste It!”

Reuse—“Use it up, wear it out, make it do, or do without” □

Recycle—“Salvage for Victory” and even “Save Waste Fat for Explosives”

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Again at war and our oil supply looking ever-more precarious, conserving precious resources is once more patriotic. What's recycling got to do with oil? A lot! It takes millions of barrels of oil to mine raw materials, transport them, manufacture finished goods, package them, transport them and finally sell them to us, the consumers. We save fossil fuels when we reduce or reuse rather than buying new. While recycling collection and processing requires fuel, the amount is still less than what it would take to make aluminum cans, glass bottles and cardboard boxes from virgin materials. In the case of plastics—which are made from petroleum—the case for recycling is even stronger.

So next time you recycle, give yourself a pat on the back. Not only are you helping the environment, but you're making America a stronger country besides!

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